

St. John's Church, now the Cathedral of St. John  
271 North Main Street, northeast corner of North  
Main and Church Streets  
Providence  
Providence County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-204

An addendum to  
Saint John's Church  
North Main and Church Street, Providence, Rhode Island  
in HABS Catalog (1941)

HABS  
RI,  
4-PROV,  
104-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. RI-204

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Address: 271 North Main Street, northeast corner of North Main and Church Streets, Providence, Providence County, Rhode Island

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Present Owner and Occupant: Rhode Island Diocese of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 101 Benefit Street, Providence, Rhode Island

Present Use: Cathedral church of the Rhode Island Diocese of the Protestant Episcopal Church

Brief Statement of Significance: This church is the second building erected by the first Episcopal parish in Providence, and has been the Cathedral church of the Rhode Island Diocese since 1929. It is an important work of the Providence architect, John Holden Greene.

## PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Originally owned by St. John's parish, in 1929 the parish gave its buildings, endowments, and many of its rights to the Diocese, making this building the Cathedral of St. John
2. Date of erection: Earlier building on this site demolished 1810. Cornerstone of present building laid June 5, 1810. Present building consecrated on St. Barnabas' Day, June 11, 1811.
3. Architect: John Holden Greene
4. Builders: Smith and Asa Bosworth
5. Notes on alterations and additions:
  - 1816 Chandelier in the nave added
  - 1850 Tower clock given by the Allen family
  - 1851 Gallery organ installed

1853- Present chapel at the southeast corner of the  
1855 church added, extended 20' in 1865. Richard Upjohn  
may have been the architect; Upjohn, Richard Upjohn  
Architect and Churchman, indicates letters in the  
Upjohn files relating to the chapel dated February  
26, 1855, March 7, 1864, October 6, 1864.  
1867- Transepts added)  
1868 )  
1871 Interior remodelled and decorated  
1893 Parish house adjoining the church on the north built  
1899- Interior painting)  
1901 )  
1900 Galleries removed and present entrance to nave built.  
1902- Present chancel built. Given by Mrs. John Carter  
1905 Brown in memory of her two sons, John Nicholas Brown  
and Harold Brown. This rebuilding of the interior  
of the chancel first suggested by Berkeley Updike.  
Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, Architects.

6. Sources of information: John Hutchins Cady, The Civic  
and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950  
(Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), pp.  
74-76.

Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island  
(Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 410-417.

Federal Writers' Project, Rhode Island. A Guide to the  
Smallest State (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937),  
p. 268.

Welcome Arnold Greene, The Providence Plantations for  
Two Hundred and Fifty Years (Providence, 1886).

Henry Russell Hitchcock, Jr., Rhode Island Architecture  
(Providence: Rhode Island Museum Press, 1939), p. 30,  
Plate 20.

Norman Morrison Isham, John Holden Greene, unpublished  
mss. in possession of John Hutchins Cady, Providence,  
Rhode Island.

Everard M. Upjohn, Richard Upjohn. Architect and Churchman  
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).

References listed in the files of the Rhode Island  
Historical Society, Providence:

Account in the Sunday Telegram, December 23, 1900.  
"St. John's Church Celebrates 200th Anniversary,"  
Scrap book, vol. 25, pp. 38, 39.

St. John's Church, view of 1772, in Providence Magazine, March, 1921, p. 133.

St. John's Church, Glebe House, Scrap book, vol. 12, p. 26.

St. John's 181st Anniversary, Scrap book, vol. 7, p. 100.

Newspaper account of April 14, 1901, Scrap book, vol. 5, pp. 307-310.

C. A. L. Richards, an historical sermon on the 175th anniversary of the founding of St. John's Church, June 13, 1897.

John Frank Scott, an historical sermon the 200th anniversary of the founding of St. John's Church, June 11, 1922.

Franklin Richmond Cushman, "King's Church--St. John's Church, 1722-1929."

"King's Church--St. John's Church, The Cathedral of St. John, 1722, The Story of St. John's Briefly Told," an historical pamphlet available in the building.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

The following is extracted from "King's Church--St. John's Church, The Cathedral of St. John, 1722, The Story of St. John's Briefly Told," an historical pamphlet available in the building:

"From 1722 until 1929 the church standing on this plot of ground was a parish church, ministering to the people of this area. It was self-governing, first according to the laws of the Church of England and after the American Revolution according to the laws of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. . . .

"The church before the American Revolution was called King's Church and afterwards renamed St. John's Church.

"In 1722 several lots of land were secured and a plain wooden church was erected upon the spot where the Cathedral now stands. It had a peaked roof, a little wooden belfrey, square boxed pews that were heated by foot warmers. At the head of the main aisle was a high pulpit, a reading desk below, and an altar behind the pulpit.

"The first minister records that in 1722 the congregation numbered one hundred, the greater part not of Providence,

and the communicants numbered seventeen.

"In 1762 a tower was added to the church and a gallery on the inside. A pipe organ was installed in 1771 putting the church deeply in debt. The same year a clock was installed in the steeple being financed by a lottery authorized by the legislature.

"The parish during the Revolution had some difficulties. The Rev. John Graves, the rector, resigned because he felt he must be faithful to his ordination vows to pray for the king. He remained in Providence, faithfully ministering to the needs of the congregation but not conducting public worship.

"In 1794 the General Assembly allowed the parish to change its name to St. John's Church. In December 1799, at the time of George Washington's death, a memorial service was held in the church and a symbolic urn was buried beneath the church. When the days of mourning had been fulfilled, the broadcloth hangings with which the church had been draped were given to the Rev. Mr. Clark for a suit of clothes.

"By 1910 the old wooden structure had become unsafe. Great hurricanes had at times torn out windows. A decision was made to tear the old building down and erect a new one on the same spot. . . .

"Bishop McVickar, in 1906, requested the Vestry of St. John's to consider making the church his cathedral. In 1909 a Cathedral Corporation was established by act of the legislature. No further action was taken to make St. John's a Cathedral. In 1927 Bishop Perry became the Rector of St. John's Parish and two years later in 1929 the parish conveyed all its property and assets to the Cathedral Corporation. St. John's then became the Cathedral Church of the Diocese of Rhode Island, two centuries after its founding.

"One of the historic treasures of St. John's is its graveyard. In 1767 land was deeded to the church for a graveyard which remained open for burials until 1870. In it lie buried many people who influenced the history of the church and state.

"By 1829 St. John's had established St. Paul's Church, Pawtucket, and gave all its communicants on the west side of the river to establish Grace Church, Providence, presently the two largest Episcopal parishes in Rhode Island. . . ."

C. Supplemental Material

The following, on John Holden Greene's sources for the design of St. John's, is extracted from Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island, pp. 410, 412:

" . . . The Federal Street Church in Boston, built in 1809 and torn down in 1859, was one of Charles Bulfinch's few essays in the Gothic Revival style. The exterior of this church, with its square tower rising from a larger square pedimented base, and its semicircular portico supported by banded colonnettes and decorated with a cusped arcade, thoroughly suggested the Providence church, although the latter has no spire. The interior of St. John's, though not like that of the Federal Street Church, is also derived ultimately from a Bulfinch design. According to Bulfinch's drawing for the ground plan of the Hollis Street Church, put up in 1788, a domical ceiling was supported on four columns. Such a treatment was doubtless inspired by Wren's St. Stephen's Walbrook in London, which Bulfinch is known especially to have admired. Greene adopted the same motive, with certain modifications, and interpreted it in a combination of Gothic and classic detail in the interior of St. John's."

Prepared by Natalie Saltonstall  
for the Providence Preservation  
Society

and  
Osmund R. Overby, Architect  
National Park Service  
February 1962

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: The following evaluation of the building is from Hitchcock, Rhode Island Architecture, p. 30: "St. John's is Gothic, at least in intention, but like Bulfinch's Federal Street church of 1809, which it follows in the main externally, it belongs still to that whimsical mid-eighteenth century 'Gothick' associated with the names of Batty Langley and Horace Walpole in England. The interior, which has a shallow dome within a square plan like Bulfinch's Hollis Street church, has rather charming delicate clustered piers supporting the dome at the rear, although the piers at the other end are Doric; and once had balconies whose fronts were decorated with almost Venetian tracery, all in the manner

of Batty Langley and other eighteenth century purveyors of 'Gothick' detail for gazebos. But if the detail be somewhat irrelevant and inconsistent, the space composition is excellent, and the way in which the old balcony fronts once repeated the line of the dome was a stroke of genius. The Gothic was still for a generation to permit freedoms that the Classic did not, and even to encourage an expression of volume as opposed to mass and a whimsical inventiveness in detail well suited to American materials and methods of workmanship. The same qualities are equally evident in the treatment of the exterior, and even more perhaps in the ambitious two-storey plaster-vaulted vestibule."

2. Condition of fabric: Good

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Original rectangular church, 82' long, 67' wide, facing west; situated on a hillside with main entrance in basement story at ground level at west; tower over west entrance vestibule, 34' wide x 14', 59'-6" high above basement story. Chapel added 1855 at southeast corner. Parish house adjoining church on north added 1893.
2. Foundations: Random coursed, smooth faced, Smithfield stone.
3. Wall construction: Upper walls of same construction as foundations, but with brownstone quoins and window trim.
4. Porches: One-story entrance porch, semicircular, supported by four clustered, banded Gothic colonnettes, entablature with cusped decoration, molded cornice surmounted by open, pointed crenelation.
5. Chimneys: Inconspicuous chimney at rear.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doors: Two-leaf, paneled, wood main entrance door in porch on west side, opens into vestibule at basement level with stairs at both sides to main level. Rear door at upper level on southeast leads to south transept and 1855 chapel.
  - b. Windows: Large windows in pointed, arched openings; each opening divided into paired lancets by slender, round, banded frames; double hung sash with pointed

tracery pattern in the mullions in the arched zone. Similar, but wider, window over west entrance porch, framed by clustered, banded Gothic piers supporting an entablature with a cusped decoration similar to the porch. Pointed window in gable end above entrance; similar windows in sides of tower.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roofs, asphalt shingles.
- b. Cornice: Simple molded cornices, horizontal cornice carried across gable ends.
- c. Tower: Two-stage, square tower above roof line over west entrance vestibule: first stage of stone matching lower walls, with clock faces; second stage of wood, an open belfry with large, unglazed pointed openings with Gothic tracery, cornice with bracketed frieze surmounted by battlements and corner pinnacles.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Wide shallow entrance narthex at base of tower on west end at basement level, double flights of stairs to main level; large, nearly square, nave with only a small organ gallery at west end, short transepts, shallow channel. North transept houses organ, small chantry chapel in south transept. Wing to southeast has choir room and storerooms on first floor, 1855 Chapel on second floor.
2. Stairways and narthex: U-shape stairways at both north and south ends of narthex, open well, open string, rectangular balusters ending in interlocking pointed arches, heavy molded handrail. Plaster Gothic ceiling vaults supported on four clustered banded Gothic piers which rise from ground level through open well of stair. Piers have entablature blocks decorated with combined Gothic trefoils and Adam fans. Similar entablature blocks as corbels receive the vaults at the walls.
3. Flooring: Modern asphalt tile.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster. Ceiling of nave a flat, circular plaster dome about 60' in diameter, with small band around the circumference decorated with protruding rosettes, large plaster medallion at center of dome with a regular, geometric, foliated ornament.



ST. JOHN'S CHURCH,  
NOW THE CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN  
HABS No. RI-204 (Page 8)

Plaster walls in upper part of chancel marked off in panels.

5. Doors: Doors from narthex to nave, leather covered, upper halves lighted with pointed tracery.
6. Trim: Nave windows have simple molded architraves. Organ gallery supported on four small, clustered colonettes; two large Gothic piers similar to those in the narthex at front corners of gallery continue to ceiling; gallery front decorated with applied ornament made up of pointed arches and trefoils; decorative Gothic organ case in gallery. Box pews, 44" high, paneled sides. Transepts and choir decorated with 1905 carved, oak, natural woodwork: North and south transepts closed off by high paneled screens, with large double doors at their centers with stepped, broken segmental pediments with crowned medallions and fluted Ionic columns at the sides; high, open rood or choir screen, with high paneled and carved wainscot, square paneled columns with Ionic, Scamozzi capitals, broken triangular pediments at the corners, center pediment similar to transept pediments; Roman Ionic cornices, egg and dart bed mold, ornamented second bed mold and taenia; Wineglass pulpit in front of choir screen at southwest, with paneled sides, and stairway with box steps and scrolled balusters; chancel walls have similar, richly carved paneling; wall behind altar in triumphal arch form with flat fluted pilasters and free Corinthian capitals, similar segmental pediment, similar cornice but with carved modillions.
7. 1855 Chapel: Chapel about 30' x 46' plus small chancel, compass ceiling forming a barrel vault with four flat faces separated by moldings, pointed windows and chancel ceiling. Label molding over chancel opening, small gallery at rear, plaster walls and ceiling, wood floor.
8. Hardware: Doors in 1905 woodwork have brass thumb latches.
9. Lighting: Electric. Two-decker, crystal candelabrum hangs from center of ceiling.
10. Heating: Central heating.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: Church faces west at northeast corner of North Main and Church Streets, lot slopes from west up to east, set back from sidewalks with small lawn areas on south and west sides, early graveyard on north and east sides, lawns terraced with random stone walls.
2. Enclosures: Iron railing in trefoil pattern with stone posts on low stone foundation around west front side, stone retaining wall along sidewalk on south side.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect  
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